

*For information*

**OPENING REMARKS  
Major Trends and Developments in 2020  
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## 1. Introduction

I greet you brothers and sisters in Christ and welcome to our third meeting this year. I begin by expressing my deep gratitude to executive committee members and staff for the commitment and dedication you have shown in your work during the past difficult months. We as leadership are aware that a number of us have lost dear ones since we last met in July while others, have close friends and relatives hospitalized. Let us observe a minute of silence in honour of the saints who have departed from the earth. Thank you!

It is our expectation that we the executive committee will work on plenary and sub-committee agendas with the aim of receiving reports and providing guidance for the coming year 2021. We will also request members to share changes in their churches and countries. Although we will not have a time for personal consultations you are free to share your views through the chart or portal.

**The COVID-19 pandemic:** It is my honour to share with you a couple of highlights that I believe have a bearing on our work and fellowship. To begin with, we note that the world is still in a big fight against COVID-19 pandemic, having recorded over 47,257,743 cases and 1,209,992 deaths as of 5 November 2020. It has abruptly disrupted the momentum towards achievement of the development agenda having triggered the most profound economic and societal crisis the world has seen for the last century. These disruptions have come in an already highly volatile international context marked by geo-strategic tensions, the climate crisis, deep and growing global mistrust, as well as rising levels of inequality. It is vital to look at some of the trends for a clearer view on the global state of affairs.

## 2. Economic trends

COVID-19 has created a devastating setback to economic growth across the globe. The economic crisis it has unleashed is hurting economies, regardless of income levels. The most recent data indicate that both lower- and upper middle-income countries have been significantly impacted by COVID-19. As this disaster plays out, the few rich are getting richer and the rest are being left behind. These inequalities are rising compounded by loss of employment due to closure of industries globally and nationally.

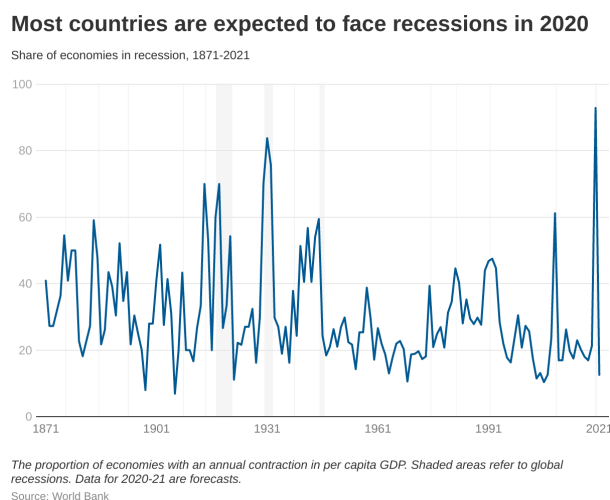


Figure 1 (source: World Bank)

Initial assessments already pointed towards likely outcomes in the short term and alert us to the immense risks of failing to act swiftly and in a coordinated manner. Global GDP is expected to contract sharply in 2020 – estimates range from 3.2 percent to 5.2 per cent – potentially the largest contraction in economic activity since the Great Depression, and far worse than the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. In 2020 alone, millions (estimates range from around 35 to 60 million) could be pushed into extreme poverty, reversing the declining global trend of the last 20-plus years (United Nations, 2020; World Bank). Some 1.6 billion people working in the informal sector including the gig economy are estimated to be at risk of losing their livelihoods and many lack access to any form of social protection (ILO, 2020).

### **3. Trends in Governance**

**3.1 Authoritarian governments:** The re-emergence and rise of authoritarian governments. As a response to COVID-19, most governments have imposed harsh rules and regulations on their citizens. Though directives such as lockdowns and travel restrictions are welcome to mitigate the spread of the virus in the short-term, this tendency is providing leeway for governments to infringe on human rights even in the future if not closely checked and rebuffed.

**3.2 Popular nationalism:** Growing popular nationalism, leading to racism and even xenophobia – with so much stress piling up, the world is witnessing a situation where people are turning on themselves. Societies are starting to regroup around racial, ethnic or national identities, shaped by religion, culture and history. The resurfacing of “Identity” as a defining factor needs challenging in view of our assembly theme. We cannot negate our identities but cannot accept manipulation and abuse of “identity.”

**3.3 Authorities and organizations using aid as a weapon:** With many people now jobless and inequality rising fast, it is sad that aid could be used as a weapon. Discrimination mostly occurs at the distribution level; governments should be strict and streamline the processes of supporting the most vulnerable groups by ensuring that all needy and marginalized people get aid when available.

**3.4. COVID-19 corruption:** In the current crisis, recent media and watchdog reports from numerous countries highlight cases of price-gouging and lucrative contracts awarded to well-connected corporations without proper procurement processes. Furthermore, funds aimed at addressing the economic crisis are also vulnerable to corruption. In the recently concluded G20 Interfaith Forum, the UN Special Advisor on Development funding noted that Africa was the biggest loser of millions of dollars in illicit transfers.

**3.5 Civil society:** Civil society was already shrinking prior to COVID-19 pandemic. During this pandemic, organisations supporting poor, marginalised and vulnerable communities have been hindered through COVID-19 related movement restrictions.

#### 4. Social-economic trends

The COVID-19 outbreak affects all segments of the population and is particularly detrimental to members of certain social groups. Below are some of the social economic trends:

**4.1 Increasing poverty:** According to Global Economic Prospects (GEP), COVID-19 is pushing between 71 and 100 million into extreme poverty based on the baseline and downside scenarios. The global poverty rate was projected to go down to 8.2 percent in 2019, but due to COVID-19, is now projected to increase to 8.8 percent (baseline) and 9.2 percent (downside) in 2020.

	Averages or shares by poverty status in 2020		
	“Chronic poor” Poor pre-COVID19 (C)	“New poor” (A+B)	“Non-poor” post-Covid19 (D)
Average household size	7.64	6.87	4.52
Urban (%)	19	28	54
Age (average # years)	20.98	23.07	33.74
Male (%)	49	49	50
Land-phone in household (%)	2	4	13
Cellphone in household (%)	54	67	82
Computer in household (%)	1	3	18
Access to electricity (%)	32	51	84
Access to improved water (%)	60	74	90
Access to improved sanitation (%)	32	45	75

Table 1

**4.2 Youth:** Many governments have called on youth to embrace the effort to protect themselves and the overall population against the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the general trend shows that the youth are disproportionately unemployed, and those who are employed often work in the informal economy or gig economy, on precarious contracts or in the service sectors of the economy, that are likely to be severely affected by COVID-19.



Figure 2

Additionally, 10 million of the world's children could face acute malnutrition, and the number of people facing acute food insecurity could almost double relative to 2019, rising to 265 million (WFP, 2020a; 2020b). School closures have affected over 90% of the world's student population – 1.6 billion children and youth (UNESCO, 2020). Accounting for the inability to access the internet for remote learning, this could result in out-of-school rates in primary education not seen since the mid-1980s (UNDP, 2020). Assessments such as these are especially worrisome as they can translate into life-long deficits, perpetuating inequalities across generations.

**4.3 Access to water:** Alongside social distancing, case isolation and contact tracing, regular hand washing with water and soap is recognized as one of the most important measures to prevent transmission of COVID-19. Yet many people still do not have a hand washing facility with water and soap available at home. Latest reports reveal that globally just 3 out of 5 people had a basic hand washing facility, with coverage even lower in least developed countries (one in four).

**4.4 Gender-based violence:** The UNDP estimates that over 243 million women and girls ages 15-49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence in the previous 12 months perpetrated by an intimate partner. The number is likely to increase as security, health, and money worries heighten tensions and strains and are accentuated by cramped and confined living conditions during and after the COVID-19 period.

**4.5 Growing mental health issues:** Earlier this year, when the pandemic spread rose, not many could have imagined mental health as a probable impact of COVID-19. Fast-forward and we have a situation where people are locked down with no food in the house, loss of jobs, domestic abuse, depression, anxiety and even panic attacks. There is growing need for psychosocial support in communities.

## 5. Technology trends

Social distancing and lockdowns have characterized the larger part of 2020 due to the need to curb COVID-19. Technology and especially the internet, have proven to be very essential during this times. As companies seek new tech solutions to fight the COVID-19 crisis, some interesting themes have emerged. New tech has fallen into certain categories with 25% of solutions taking on detection and containment, 20% tackling problems involving healthcare provider enablement, and another 21% grappling with economic resilience. Additionally, nearly a third of these use cases were global, speaking to the collaborative and interconnected nature of this pandemic response.

Figure 1: Share of Use Cases by Category

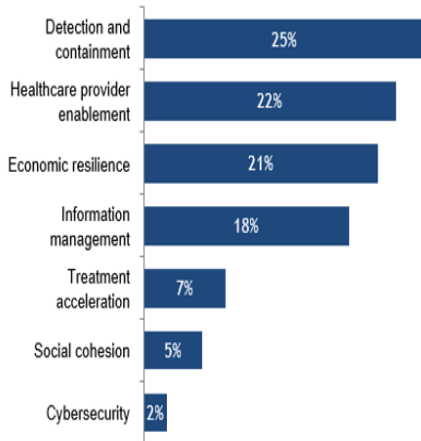


Figure 2: Share of Use Cases by Region

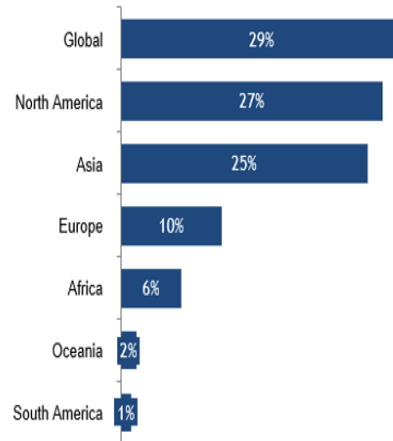


Figure 1 (Source: World Economic Forum)

As with every great challenge in human history, this pandemic has and will continue to bring out the best in human ingenuity and innovation. Among each of these exciting new technologies emerges one common theme: efficacy may not be a measurable net, but casting a wide net is more likely to be effective at discovering useful technical applications. However, there are other trends worth noting on technology:

**5.1 Cyber bullying on the rise:** According to L1ght, an organization that monitors online harassment and hate speech, there has been a 70% increase in cyber-bullying in just a matter of months. They also found a 40% increase in toxicity on online gaming platforms, a 900% increase in hate speech on Twitter directed toward China and the Chinese, and a 200% increase in traffic to hate sites.

**5.2 Child abuse:** A World Health Organization report on global child abuse noted that schools were closed to 1.5 billion children worldwide because of the pandemic; this has given them more time online exposing children to an increased risk of online sexual exploitation. On the other hand, many children are stuck with their abusers, without the safe space that school would normally offer.

**5.3 Mental health issues:** Online platforms are by design addictive and encourage endless scrolling which is why it is so common for people to spend many hours online or engaged with social media. There may also be implications for physical and mental health with respect to work/life balance during the COVID-19 outbreak, as time during stay-at-home orders may lack a clear transition between work/school and leisure.

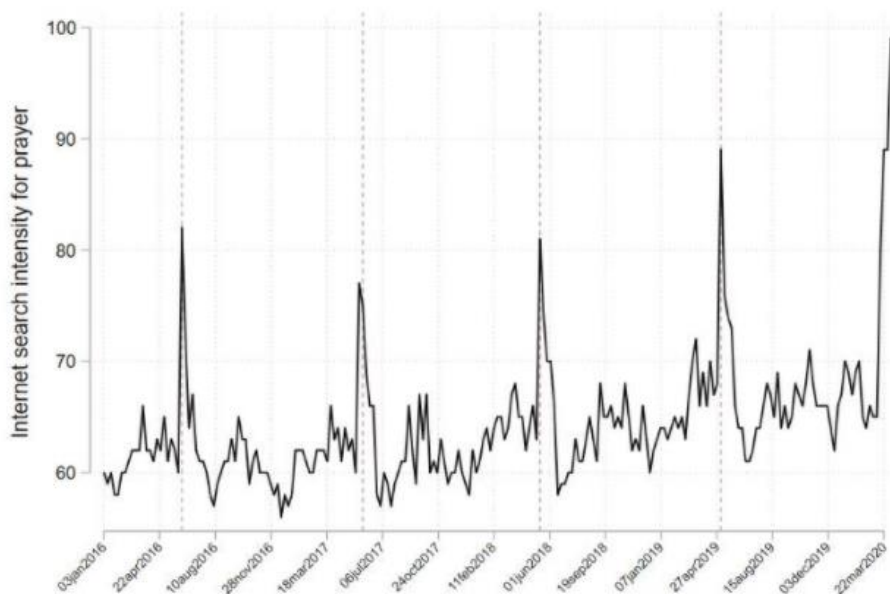
**5.4 Electronic surveillance:** COVID-19 has necessitated fast tracking of surveillance technologies under the guise of measures to “test and trace” the contacts. Governments are

rapidly deploying new systems of digital surveillance which are not just to control the virus, but also to control the populations thus infringing on human rights.

## 6. Religious trends

Religious communities are playing important roles in all dimensions and social sectors through creative adaptations of practice, messaging that separates facts and rumour, support to communities, outreach to outliers and doubters, and the tamping down of prejudices. Many advocate powerfully for sharp attention to vulnerable and suffering communities. Here are some trends.

**6.1 Increased religiosity:** Despite the fact that there have been limited church attendances, there sure has been an increase in religiosity. There is rising ‘prayer intensity’ in that people are seeking for hope during these tough times. A study done early in the year, seeking to understand how many times people searched for the word “prayer,” revealed that there is a sure rise on Google as shown.



**6.2 Recognition of vital role of faith based efforts:** It is a good moment in time again when religious actors are being invited to the table to offer help in fighting the pandemic. This is due to the fact that religion has communication networks and deep knowledge of local communities. We have seen religious bodies being invited to UN discussions on how to better fight the pandemic.

**6.3 Rise in religious extremism due to misinformation:** It is disheartening how religions have been misinterpreted by conspiracists and religious extremists to achieve their own objectives. For instance, the Somalia-based terror group Al-Shabaab, declared COVID-19 to be Allah’s punishment sent on unbelievers. Their spokesman called on Muslims to rejoice in the “painful torment” inflicted on non-Muslims by COVID-19. He mocked the Somali government’s lockdown measures, which included closing mosques and Islamic seminaries. Islamic State and Al-Qaeda also celebrated the virus, describing it as a “small soldier of Allah” sent to attack

his enemies. According to reports, some even believe that fighting jihad will guarantee protection from becoming infected with the virus.

Attacks on Christians in Nigeria's Middle Belt soared during lockdown, as extremists exploited the fact that the authorities had diverted security resources to combatting the virus and Christians locked down in their homes were a sitting target.

**6.4 Decrease in offerings and financial resources:** the impact of the crisis on economy is out there for anyone to see and with such a diverse deepening. Church members faced unemployment, something that in turn limited contributions during sermons. For these churches, this level of financial recalibration, if prolonged, will have significant and ongoing financial implications on the daily work of most churches.

## **7. Vital roles the church can continue playing during and after COVID-19**

**7.1 Enhancing the advocacy role of the church on health matters:** We can promote accurate and reliable information. We depend on evidence-based information on prevention, care and supportive treatment. So, let's alert the faith communities of this. We know how to contain this pandemic, and the prevention efforts hinge on minimizing person-to-person and object-to-person transmission. Still, there is a plethora of wrong or inaccurate information that spreads fear and ignorance. Such fear and panic can promote essential item hoarding and panic buying. Faith communities and our leaders must speak up, to counter irrational fear, to promote truth, dignity, love and fortitude.

**7.2 Increasing awareness:** The church has the integral role of informing the public on the impact of the virus and especially on how spreading can be curbed. As such, nationwide sensitization of citizens and businesses on sanitization initiatives and control/prevention measures are key which will also demystify most of the misinformation around the virus, and effectively control the emotional contagion.

**7.3 Mobilizing local agents to safeguard livelihoods and progress on the Sustainable Development Goals:** Churches have always been on the forefront in mobilizing resources to help the vulnerable. Though times are tough, it is important that churches liaise with local non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations and even government authorities to consolidate resources and help in the distribution, too. Urban slums are hotspots for the spread of disease, and so targeting these areas of extreme poverty through health interventions alongside other forms of sustainable development would offer a longer-term solution to preventing the spread of future outbreaks and reducing impoverishment.

**7.4 Economic empowerment during and after COVID-19:** Develop targeted economic empowerment strategies and social safety nets to protect those who are the worst affected and most vulnerable. These safety nets, which could be in the form of cash or in-kind transfers – should be accompanied by intervention from health and nutrition officials, because investing in the health and nutrition of vulnerable populations could lower the mortality rate of diseases such as COVID-19 – as nutritional levels and mortality rates are intricately linked. Social safety nets are also crucial in the post-epidemic period to drive “reconstruction” efforts.



**7.5 Act as a watchdog against stigmatization and discrimination:** Ensure that migrants and refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people are included in national surveillance, preparedness, and response plans and activities. It would be helpful to engage with them to ensure that aid distribution and even adherence to lockdown measures in the fight against COVID-19 are successful.

**7.6 Advocate for incorporation of anti-gender-based violence efforts in the fight against COVID-19:** Increase advocacy efforts to ensure that emergency preparedness and response plans are grounded in sound gender analyses, considering gendered roles, risks, responsibilities, and social norms, and accounting for the unique capabilities and needs of other vulnerable populations. This includes ensuring that mitigation and response measures address women's and girls' caregiving burdens and heightened gender-based violence risks.

**7.7 Investments in the health sector especially in developing countries:** Invest in long-term health structure to build stronger and more resilient systems. This makes sense both from a health and an economic perspective. Putting more resources on the front lines to detect and treat conditions early, before they become more serious, saves lives, improves health outcomes, reduces healthcare costs and strengthens preparedness for when outbreaks occur.

## **Conclusion**

While we understood the gravity of COVID-19 when it began, few could have anticipated – and indeed many still do not fully appreciate – the depth of change through which we are living. With changing contexts all over the world, the church too is impacted adversely. In this article, I highlight some of the trends that will continue to inform church operations as they have this year. The rise of authoritarianism, racism, xenophobia, misinformation, gender-based violence, etc. will surely unsettle church structures globally. For the church, the coronavirus has exposed and exacerbated deep ecclesiastical problems in the identity and witness of the church. Measures to mitigate the pandemic have made Christians abstain from physically attending sermons. It is a painful time where we can only show love for one another by staying away from one another. Though the church has tried to innovate ways to spread the message of hope during this pandemic, there is no doubting that it has been severely hindered. Though under strained financial resources, there's a lot to be done.

As the leadership we wish the executive committee a fruitful time and a virtual safe space for sharing, reflection, discerning God's will for the ecumenical movement and more specifically the World Council of Churches at this critical transition period.

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